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Changes Undergone by Kurtz and Marlow

Purpose of this Presentation

We will compare and contrast the changes undergone by the characters Kurtz and Marlow and attempt to explain the differences in these changes by examining each character's background and intentions.

Colonial Context

1876: Association Internationale Africaine (a development company ruled by Leopold II of Belgium) is formed.

1885: Berlin Conference. King Leopold acquires formal control of Congo as his personal property, renaming it the Congo Free State.

1885- 1908: Leopold and his army terrorize Congolese population in pursuit of resources, such as ivory, a recurring motif in the book.

1908: Belgian parliament takes control over Congo Free State, renaming it Belgian Congo.

Culture of the Belgian Congo

- Dancing
- Clothing
- Food

Dancing & Clothing

- African dance music incorporates drums and is very rambunctious compared to, say, the waltz, a “scandalous” dance fad in Europe at the time.
- Marlow called the Congolese dancing “wild.”
- 19th century Europe had high standards of modesty; traditional Congolese tribal clothing was minimal.
- Marlow repeatedly refers to natives as “naked” and “bare.”



European ladies and gentlemen dancing the waltz. (c. late 19th century)

Women of the Bangala tribe, in the Upper Congo. (c. 1905)



Congolese tribe, as illustrated by Edouard Riou for a European magazine. (c. 1892)



Food

- Cannibalism.
- The hippopotamus is native to Africa and is eaten there.
- The European people attempt to kill the hippo, but they are unsuccessful. (pg. 131)
- The hippo symbolizes the futility of the Europeans/the Company.

"You can't breathe dead hippo waking, sleeping, and eating, and at the same time keep your precarious grip on existence." (pg. 144)

"...a few lumps of some stuff like half-cooked dough, of a dirty lavender colour..." (pg. 145)

The Europeans' reaction exemplifies distrust of the unfamiliar.



Kwanga

Hippo



Character Comparison

Marlow

- English
- Seamen
- Resilient (pg. 179)
- Honest (pg. 129)
- Independent thinker (pg. 169 & 178)
- Master storyteller
- Compassionate (pg. 118-19)

Kurtz

- Middle/upper class European families
- Disconnect from reality
- Similar reactions to Belgian Congo culture ("savagery")
- Described as deities (pg. 103 & 167)

- Cosmopolitan (pg. 154)
- Multitalented (pg. 180)
- Painter
- Musician
- Writer
- Promising politician
- Ambitious (pg. 177)
- Domineering (pg. 162-63)

Effects of Belgian Congo Culture on Kurtz and Marlow

- The characters of Kurtz and Marlow are strongly affected by the culture of the Congo.
- The end result of the culture on each of them is different.
- Kurtz takes advantage of the power he gains, goes mad, and eventually dies.
- Marlow tries to do the right thing, doesn't misuse his power, and survives his experience.

Kurtz

- The book does not tell us very much about Kurtz firsthand – must make inferences.
- However, everyone seems to have something positive to say about him.
- When Marlow finally meets Kurtz, he gets a very different impression.
- Kurtz becomes addicted to power and dies in the Congo.

Marlow

- Marlow starts out similar to Kurtz – same background.
- Marlow is horrified by some of the things he sees in the Congo, but he ultimately seems to see himself as powerless.
- His main focus quickly becomes meeting Kurtz.
- Marlow becomes sick and almost dies, but survives to make it out of the Congo.

Background/Initial Attitudes to Congo

Kurtz:

- Goes to Congo for colonization (profit combined with “civilisation” of Africans). (pg. 155)
- Initially seen as a remarkable employee: got most ivory. (pg. 120)
- Starting keeping ivory for personal profit, not company’s profit. (pg. 153)
- “All of Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz ” (i.e. European but not strongly of one place) (pg. 154)



Marlow:

- Goes to Congo for a chance to sail a ship.
- Dehumanizing view of the natives (“creatures,” “phantoms,” “devils”)
- Identifies strongly as being English. (pg. 108, 110)
- Horrified by the brutality, but does nothing (complacency) (pg. 118-19)

Changes in Attitudes to Congo

- Marlow temporarily departs from reality (“peeped from the edge” of the cliff of insanity), but he steps back in time, unlike Kurtz. (pg. 178)
- Kurtz departs entirely from reality; was once a regular European man; not an outlaw or anything. But he became a murderer. Post script: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (pg. 155)
- Kurtz was searching for profit like all other colonialists; but was driven crazy by greed.
- Kurtz integrates with the natives; participates in their ceremonies – the same “savage customs” he wrote a pamphlet about suppressing.

Other Changes in Attitudes

- While Marlow was not an imperialist, he did initially condone and, in fact, agree with the European view of the natives as less than human. But he changed his mind about colonialism.

"They were conquerors...it was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale..." (pg. 107)

"I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas – a regular dose of the East – six years or so, and I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilise you." (pg. 108)

Explanation of Changes

The explanation for why Kurtz and Marlow reacted differently to the Congo lies in their different characters and intentions.

Superficially, Kurtz and Marlow seem to come from identical backgrounds: privileged, European, powerful (white & male in patriarchal/racist society), but their characters differ.

As mentioned, Kurtz had a natural tendency to greed, which led him to Congo. Marlow had natural compassion and indifference to wealth; he is unmoved by tempting ivory, only wants to sail a ship.

Continued Explanation

- Both had ingrained view of natives as “uncivilised,” but Kurtz took it further and sought to dominate them entirely.
- Kurtz did not have a country he identified strongly with, so he adopted the customs of the natives & became their leader.
- Marlow was proudly English and maintained his distaste for Congolese traditions; example, his disgust at the hippo meat.
- As a seaman, Marlow was noticeably wary of the forest; another factor that distanced him from the natives who lived there.
- Kurtz obviously had no fear of the forest; eventually lived there.

Ultimately, Kurtz has every imperialist’s aims (domination, power, profit) but takes it further.

Marlow, though employed by the company, was a sailor, not imperialist.

Bibliography - Photos

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